‘Proof of Gratitude? Soldier Land Settlement in New Zealand After World War I’

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of soldier land settlement in New Zealand after World War I. Entrenched in New Zealand folklore and historiography is the belief that the majority of soldier settlers failed and walked off their farms. This thesis, however, questions this orthodoxy and presents evidence showing that significant aspects of the soldier settlers' story have, for ideological and political reasons, been misunderstood and misrepresented by later writers who have been blinkered to the achievements of the Reform Government. Closely tied to this traditional notion of failure are assumptions about the high cost and poor quality of land involved, and the inexperience and under-capitalisation of the settlers. This study pays particular attention to the development and implementation of government policy. It shows that land purchase and its distribution, and on-going support for settlers by the Government, were based on more sophisticated and discerning policies than later writers have allowed. This study examines the expectations of the primary parties in the settlement process and shows how these expectations were both perceived and presented in the media as unfulfilled. More soldiers survived on their farms than is generally recognised. This was the result of deliberate government policy in response to uncertain economic conditions during the interwar period. This survival rate was not without cost, both in economic terms for the Crown, and in personal terms for the participating soldiers. The farming experience of the interwar period was not as the soldiers expected - faced as they were with a loss of individual freedom and the development of financial dependency. The dominating image to have survived in the historical orthodoxy is that the soldiers were betrayed. This was based upon the strength of their moral claims to recognition and recompense from the community which they had defended. However, this thesis argues that any betrayal was actually of the Arcadian expectations with which the soldiers had returned to New Zealand, and of the heady expectations that the community initially had of the soldiers. These hopes and ideals, it is suggested, proved to be irreconcilable with contemporary political and economic realities. The perceived experience of the soldiers nevertheless assured them their status as victims.
"Get back on the land". That was the slogan which greeted the soldier on his return to New Zealand. The Government made obedience easy and the soldier obeyed with a gratifying enthusiasm. Most likely he was impelled by the bright prospects of prosperity and of a desire for a continuation of the open life.

Quick March, 10 January 1922, p.30.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AJHR       Appendices to the Journal of the House of Representatives.

L&S        Department of Lands and Survey.

NA         The National Archives of New Zealand.

NZPD       New Zealand Parliamentary Debates.

RSA        New Zealand Returned Soldiers’ Association.

WTU        Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.
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